

April 8, 2021

**RE: House Bill No. 5683 (support) and Budget Article 13, Section 5 (support):**

Chairman Abney, Vice Chairpersons Slater and Marszalkowski, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of our 41 nonprofit members who provide and advocate for family strengthening and support, comprehensive child and family services including: behavioral health, special education, juvenile justice, and healthcare services; foster care and residential treatment programs, and a strong and effective human services workforce. RICCF has prioritized House Bill No. 5683 and Budget Article 13, Section 5 regarding the Rhode Island Works program as critical to strengthening Rhode Island families with children.

**RICCF supports the proposed bill H-5683**, which will 1) increase the monthly cash assistance payment to families receiving RI Works Benefits from 30% to 50% of the federal poverty level; 2) provide the existing \$100 yearly clothing allowance to all children in the family, extending this benefit to infants and toddlers aged 4 and younger; 3) allow a parent to attend CCRI for two years as their benefit-contingent employment plan activity; and 4) exclude income from earnings for up to 6 months when a parent starts a job, allowing newly employed parents a stronger likelihood of job retention.

**RICCF also supports Budget Article 13, Section 5**, which will enable the RI Works policies described above and adjust the definition of a dependent child. By revising its language, the budget article expands critical RI Works benefits to include those students who graduate high school at age 19, rather than stripping student benefits for dependent children before they have even graduated.

#### House Bill No. 5683

**We support this bill's swift measures** to support employment for working parents, a determinant recognized as inherent to strengthening families and improving health outcomes, particularly regarding the four following needs:

- **Children in Deep Poverty Need Stronger Monthly Assistance**  
First and impacting the largest number of families, Rhode Island must address the disparity in our monthly cash assistance program by increasing payments from 30% to 50% of the federal poverty level. This benefit would, for example, increase a family of 3's benefit from \$554 to \$915. Not only is Rhode Island the only New England state to have not increased benefit payments for 30 years, but our state also offers the lowest payment in the region. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (2020), 30% of Rhode Islanders are covered by Medicaid or CHIP – to these families, even a few dollars can be the difference between having a meal or going without.

Furthermore, as the state moves to a child wellbeing system that relies on keeping families together and placing children removed from their homes with kin whenever possible, it is critical that reasonable income supports be available to help meet basic needs for families.

- **Families with Children at All Ages Need Clothing**  
Secondly, families with infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities need the same access to clothing benefits as those families with children age four and older. Limiting the RI Works \$100 yearly clothing

allowance to older, abled children makes no sense when children need to be properly dressed whether at home or in childcare. Lifting this restriction would benefit an estimated 1,400 children who may otherwise be under-clothed and more likely to develop bacterial infections, frostbite, or respiratory infections.

- **Beneficiary Parents Need Stable Opportunity**

RI Works program eligibility is contingent on a beneficiary parent's active employment plan, which currently may include one year of attendance at CCRI. The proposed reform would allow a parent to continue their education for a second year, allowing the parent to complete an associate degree – a significant factor in increasing opportunity, as workers with an associate degree in 2019 had median weekly earnings of \$887, as opposed to only \$746 for those with a high school diploma alone (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

- **Newly Employed Parents Need Longer-Term Economic Security**

Finally, current law revokes a parent's RI Works cash benefit in the month after the parent begins a new job, even at minimum wage (\$1,743/month). Such a statute serves as a disincentive for families to work toward financial independence. Proposed changes would extend the benefit for 6 months, or until the parent earns 185% FPL (\$3,385/month for a family of 3). Job retention – which is supported by RI Works' transportation benefit and case management services – is widely recognized by our member organizations as a key factor in enhancing behavioral health and strengthening vulnerable families.

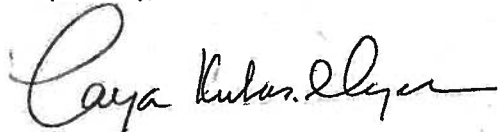
#### Budget Article 13, Section 5

Simultaneously, RICCF supports Budget Article 13, Section 5 and inclusion of the RI Works policies described above as well as its expansion of the definition of a dependent child. By revising its language, the budget article expands critical RI Works benefits to include those students who graduate high school at age 19, solving an outdated limitation to youth age 18. With the delay for many kindergarteners to age 6, many more students won't have graduated by age 18 and should not lose their benefits while still dependent high school seniors. Reforming the age limit stands only to benefit the children and families who need help most.

We stand with our partners in the Raising Rhode Island Coalition in support of the proposal to revise the Rhode Island Works program to benefit our state's poorest families. Not only are these changes long overdue – given both our evolving economy and the significant progress by neighboring states in comparable programs – but they will relieve financial burden for thousands of children and working parents.

We thank you for your consideration of these issues. We urge you to support the proposals to increase cash assistance and opportunities for longer-term economic stability through the Rhode Island Works program.

Respectfully,



Tanja Kubas-Meyer  
Executive Director